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SUBJECT: Vietnamese Catholics install new Bishop
-- and welcome a new Cardinal

Ref: A. Vatican City 4461 B. Hanoi 2294 C. Hanoi 1698

1. (U) In an open air ceremony in Son Tay town of Ha Tay province (adjacent to Hanoi), Vietnamese Catholics formally installed Father Anton Vu Huy Chuong as Bishop of Hung Hoa diocese, which covers most or all of the provinces of Ha Tay, Son La, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Yen Bai, and Phu Tho. As noted in ref b, this bishopric had been vacant for more than a decade, due to inability between the Vatican and the GVN to agree on an appointment.

2. (U) Among the guests of honor were newly appointed Cardinal (ref a) Jean Baptiste Pham Minh Man (concurrently Archbishop of Ho Chi Minh City), the Archbishop of Hue, and all of Vietnam's other 21 Bishops. Missing only was Cardinal Paul Joseph Pham Dinh Tung, who is also Archbishop of Hanoi and who has long been in poor health. More than 400 priests and 100 nuns also attended, along with a crowd of over 10,000 people, many of them ethnic minorities, primarily Hmong from Son La and Lai Chau provinces. (Note: officials in those provinces had insisted in June that there were no religious believers of any religion locally -- ref c.) Pol/C was the only foreign diplomat and perhaps the only Westerner present (although there may have been some overseas Viet Kieu among the crowd). No GVN officials were introduced or obvious among the attendees, but there may have been representatives of the Government Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) present.

3. (U) Bishop Chuong is a native of Hung Hoa diocese who had been among the Catholic exodus to the south in 1954. He had most recently been resident in Can Tho province, and indicated to Pol/C how pleased he had been to return to his native home about two months ago. Visibly tired after the three hour ceremony -- in full regalia -- despite the sunny skies and 90 degree Fahrenheit heat, he promised a follow-on meeting with Pol/C "after six days" to discuss conditions for Catholics in his diocese, especially among the minorities. The organizers made a point of including one Hmong woman to read a Bible lesson in Hmong during the service, the only lay person invited to speak.

4. (U) Cardinal Man was not a center of attention, although he and other Bishops sat on the stage and performed ritual blessings. He did not, for example, place the Bishop's new mitre on his head. However, Cardinal Man was referred to during the service by this new title, and Catholics in the congregation appeared delighted by the news (which has not appeared in the Vietnamese media, as far as Embassy is aware). Bishops, priests, and lay persons with whom Pol/C spoke expressed uniform optimism that the GVN's approval or lack thereof would be of no relevance for Man's appointment as Cardinal. In contrast, the invitation to the Bishop's own ordination explicitly noted that Pope Jean Paul II's appointment of Bishop Chuong had been "recognized by the State of Vietnam."

5. (U) According to foreign journalists, the Foreign Ministry has so far declined to comment on reports of Cardinal Man's appointment, as well as on unattributed comments from a CRA official that the GVN would not "accept" this "unilateral" appointment, or that Vietnamese diplomats in Rome had been instructed to protest to the Vatican.

6. (U) Comment: This installation marks another positive step for Vietnamese Catholics, especially their ability to organize such a large scale celebration. Like other Catholic leaders, Bishop Chuong will have to walk a fine line of adhering to the Vatican without alienating GVN officials, a task made all the more difficult by the non-recognized status of most or all of the ethnic minority congregations in the Northwest Highland areas of his diocese.

PORTER